

TITLE: The Decline and Fall of the Shah

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*Contributing Factors*

## THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE SHAH

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In *The Eagle and the Lion*, published by the Yale University Press in 1988, author James A. Bill offers a version of events in Iran which skirts many major issues in favor of a view implicitly accepting the current government as an inevitable representation of the desires of the majority of Iranians. For example, the author reacts negatively to a major historical issue facing Western governments: is it ever appropriate to intervene in a Middle Eastern country in favor of American and Western interests? For many, the answer until well into the 20th century was an easily accepted "yes." The supposed superiority of Western culture and the primacy of our interests were readily accepted by foreigners and nationals of most Middle Eastern countries as suitable justifications for intervention. With the end of World War II, this facile judgment fell into question, leading in time to the freeing of many countries from European dominance and eventually to a renaissance of a variety of ancient cultures, and, of more relevance to Bill's book, a return to the fundamentals of Islam.

While Iran never was colonized by the West, it experienced the impact of European culture. Under Reza Shah, it opted for a Western rather than an Islamic orientation. In 1953, Western countries had no qualms about intervening to protect what they saw as their fundamental interests. In the process, Western nations incurred a debt to the man they returned to the Pahlavi throne, thus reducing future Western policy alternatives when that leader's rule began to disintegrate. Bill, writing at the end of a dynasty, takes it as a given that intervention has been bad for Iran, in that it somehow prevented the emergence of true Iranian rulers. This implicit assumption underlies Bill's debunking of alternative views, while avoiding responsibility for the excesses and anachronisms of the rulers who succeeded those linked to the West. To accept Bill's approach and his underlying bias in favor of nonintervention is to do a disservice to those Iranians who have made a commitment to Western culture as offering alternatives and balance to traditional systems. By re-examining arguments dismissed by Bill, it may be possible to do some small justice to those in Iran who have lost the most to Islamic fundamentalism or who remain committed to the Western principle of representative government. For an intelligence officer, covering this ground may assist in formulating predictions and judgments on the future directions of Iranian developments.

## Opposing Theories

Both intelligence analysts and operations officers are warned early in their careers to beware of conventional wisdom. *The Eagle and the Lion* is an example of such "wisdom." The author subscribes to the popular "volcano" theory, which holds, as Bill puts it, "that the Shah's regime, backed by one of the most powerful military machines in the Third World, collapsed in the face

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of a massive popular uprising in which millions of citizens marched in the streets during a year of generally peaceful demonstrations." This is a faulty thesis, and Bill skims over some basic questions while constructing it. Because he accepts this explanation as obvious, he also sees no need to defend it with detailed arguments and documentation.

Bill accuses the US Intelligence Community of failing to build the understanding of Iran which might have led to a more enlightened and successful US policy. His charges that US intelligence was severely debilitated by bureaucratic infighting and limitations artificially imposed by Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi are particularly disturbing. From my personal perspective (b)(1)

I (b)(3)(c) believe such charges do not hold up. Bill's focus is on the forces which emerged to replace the Shah and the ignorance within the US Government of who they were and what they represented. Bill argues that, if US policymakers had known the answers to these questions, there might have been an earlier and more complete US break with the Shah in favor of these new forces. Bill's sympathies are clearly with the Iranian masses, whom he accuses the official American community of scorning in favor of a seemingly invincible Shah and those who slavishly supported him.

Readers of the book will be surprised and disappointed by how lightly Bill sketches the events surrounding the Shah's ouster. He treats the outcome as inevitable, as another case in which a tyrant is sent packing by oppressed masses finally fed up with corruption and the loss of moral values. Although Bill hints that there were those who knew the Shah would go, he does not cite any solid predictions being put on paper beforehand.

Bill's book is a polemic against insensitive and ignorant bureaucrats, backed with a plea to listen instead to academics whose understanding is deeper and unwarpd by worldly consideration. More important, Bill is biased in favor of a historical perspective which assigns greater weight to the role played by "masses" and "classes" than to the role played by leaders. In my view, he makes a basic mistake when he fails to appreciate the role of the "great leader" in the Middle East.

My view, which was formed in the last half of 1978, is that the Shah abdicated in place and that he alone was responsible for his ouster. In contrast with the volcano theory, I favor the "genie in the bottle" theory of events in Iran—the Shah removed the cork and unleashed the genie, who in turn frightened the Shah into abdicating.

### Liberalization Disaster

Anyone who tries to understand why the Shah was ousted must satisfactorily explain why this happened in 1979 and not earlier or later. Bill skims over the reasons with a retrospective emphasis on economic and religious factors which drove the masses to action. He mentions the Shah's liberalization program as a factor, but he does not give it the weight that I believe it deserves as the answer to the question of why events unfolded when they did. Bill cites the "Pahlavi invincibility thesis," or the "Pahlavi premise," as a phenomenon of "shared image" among American officials which distorted their view of the

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political realities, especially the mood of the masses. In hindsight, there is an easy appeal in Bill's theory that, if the US had looked behind the scenes, the forces forming to act against the Shah could easily have been identified.

Bill ignores another possibility, however, that does not fit his theory. According to this second theory, the Shah was indeed invincible in the mid-1970s. In true Middle Eastern fashion (Saddam Hussein in Iraq comes to mind), the Shah had built a repressive mechanism that was impervious to pressure from below, because the Shah, using Savak, had fragmented and cowed the opposition. As Bill acknowledges, the Shah had the money and political skills to coopt large sections of the opposition. Only the terrorist Mujahedin-e Khalq and the Charik-e-Fedayeen-i Khalq registered serious dissent through their armed struggle. The Shah easily dominated the Shia clergy, many of whom were in the pay of Savak, after a hard-won victory in 1963 and the exile of Ayatollah Khomeini. Why, then, did the Shah decide to liberalize? Among other reasons, Bill cites the one to which I always subscribed—the Shah wanted above all else to ensure the survival of his dynasty. To do so, he undertook, as supreme manipulator of Persians, to make political changes to broaden support from a perpetually disgruntled population which he knew his young son could not control and rule under the Shah's system of a one-man monarchy. The Shah also launched this program because he believed that events from 1963 to 1977 had erased the shame of his cowardly flight from Iran in 1953 and demonstrated his courage and his dominant political skills to both the Iranian people and himself. In the confident ruler's view, liberalization would allow for greater popular participation but still under a continuing Pahlavi dynasty.

The period from the summer of 1977 to the summer of 1978 was marked first by concession and then by repression, as the Shah floundered through a disastrous liberalization program. In his paternalistic approach, he denied Iranians a view of his objectives, leaving the fragmented opposition to shape a one-plank platform for liberalization—get rid of the Shah. The Shah's handling of the program gave all Iranians the first glimpse of his vulnerability. It became obvious that his vacillation between concession and repression was a sign that he did not know what he was doing. The Middle Eastern ruler's iron fist had begun to shake, and the opposition became increasingly confident that the Shah could be overthrown.

In this context, I recall a discussion in October 1978 (b)(3)(n) which centered on the fate of Middle Eastern rulers, once the opposition sensed their vulnerability. Ayub Khan's downfall in Pakistan, begun by his illness, was a case in point. The fall of another Pakistani leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was an even better example—one that was not lost on the Shah. During Bhutto's last weeks in power, the Shah told a visitor that Bhutto "must brazen it out" and dispel any sense of vulnerability.

By mid-October 1978, (b)(3)(c) only a miracle would save the Shah. This judgment was based on the sense that the Shah was not of the stuff needed to avert disaster. Once the Shah had freed the genie, he dissolved into an indecisive and frightened monarch who could not

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save himself or his supporters. The Shah was not overwhelmed by a mass uprising. Rather, he was not up to the task of handling the dissenting forces he had released.

### Other Negative Factors

Students of the Shah's downfall have to answer the question of why he failed so badly. At the time, we saw some contributing factors, but we did not have a complete picture. Although we were unaware of his cancer, we believed that health might have been a factor. As early as May 1978, there were rumors that the Shah had a serious illness. In retrospect, the Shah concealed his ailment, probably limiting knowledge of it to his French doctors and to a few in his inner circle. (A recent book, *The Shah's Last Ride*, by William Shawcross, suggests that the Shah and the Empress did not even acknowledge to one another that he had cancer.) During the summer of 1978, there also were widespread rumors that the Shah had been wounded in an assassination attempt. The Shah inadvertently encouraged such speculation by withdrawing to the Caspian for most of the summer. When he returned to Tehran in August, he began another round of concessions and repressions which underscored his vulnerability.

A more fundamental mistake in our appreciation of the situation was made when we lost sight of [redacted] the Shah's cowardly performance in 1953. I also believe that the death in 1977 of former Court Minister Asadollah Alam robbed the Shah of his most astute political adviser. Without Alam, the Shah was unable to cope with the fast-breaking situation or to make quickly the sound political decisions necessary for survival.

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To achieve a genuine understanding of events in Iran, other questions, either lightly touched upon or ignored by Bill, must be considered. Among these are:

- Why did the mullahs and not pro-Western moderates inherit power from the monarchy?
- Why did the Iranian military collapse?
- Could the US have saved Iran from the clerics?

### Turkish Influence

Bill makes no mention in his book of Turkey's great leader, Kemal Ataturk, and the influence he had upon affairs in Iran. In his book on Reza Shah, Donald Wilber offers a key insight into how Reza Shah was influenced by Ataturk's reshaping of the Turkish people and Ataturk's successful attempt to relegate Islam to a secondary position in favor of westernization. Reza Shah adopted Ataturk's westernization objectives as his own, and he, and later his son, successfully pursued that policy until 1978. In 1963, the Shah crushed the mullahs, and they did not reemerge as a contender until the Shah lost his grip. Why had Turkey succeeded and Iran failed in continuing westernization? In my view, Reza Shah and his son ignored the differences between Turkish and Iranian nationalism. Reza Shah returned from visiting Turkey to impose a Persian nationalism which was built upon sand, trying to copy in a land of great

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diversity the example of a homogeneous Turkish people (Kurds excluded) whose language and history allowed them to build a durable nation committed to westernization.

### Islamic Revival

With Turkey's continuing adherence to Ataturk's secular principles in mind; Bill's theory of the inevitable reemergence of Islam is not as obvious as he would argue. Rather, other causes must be sought to explain why Islam replaced the monarchy. The primary cause, I believe, was the nature of the Shah's rule. Reza Shah, and, especially his son in the later years of his rule, destroyed the institutions whose support was crucial for the Shah's liberalization program. Chief among these would have to be individuals grouped together in associations dedicated to maintaining programs favoring westernization. In 1977, the Shah set out to enlist such support. The chaotic advances and retreats of 1977-1978 clearly suggest, however, that he had never grasped that his earlier repressive policies had weakened his natural allies to the point where they lacked the will and courage to defend their national interests in the face of an Islamic resurgence.

In this situation, the mullahs had a natural advantage which was never to be overcome. Of all of the opposition forces, only the mullahs had an existing organization capable of asserting itself. Each mosque was a political unit that could field a street force.

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Other potential political forces, including the National Front, were organizationally incapable of matching the already immense human resources of the clergy. By October 1978, the more Western potential actors had resigned themselves to Khomeini's leadership filling the vacuum created by the Shah. One by one, potential leaders paid their respects and offered subjugation in Paris to the exiled Ayatollah.

### Military and Political Collapse

With the monarchy dissolving and pro-westernization forces capitulating to the Ayatollah, the military was the only institution capable of limiting the extent of the clergy's power. I seriously overestimated the potential of the military to shape events after the Shah's departure, partly because it was hard to believe that a 400,000-man force would ever abdicate its responsibility to itself and its families. As I watched the military disintegrate, the idea was ever present that other military institutions with which I was familiar would never accept such an end. Can one imagine the Indian Army abandoning the field and retreating to the barracks in the face of threats to its power and existence? Later, I was to watch the Turkish Army resume power in September 1980 to end in a day an anarchic threat to Ataturk's revolution.

Looking back, the explanation seems to lie in the unique relationship between the Shah and his military. We had one clear warning beforehand that the military would collapse, but I tended to discount it because it seemed

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that the military itself, like Persian nationalism, was founded on the sand of the Shah's person.

The Shah himself nurtured an every-man-for-himself ethic when he threw his loyal supporters to the political wolves in the fall of 1978. The fate of Savak head General Nimatullah Nassiri is an excellent example. Nassiri had many faults, but his courage and loyalty to the Shah were not among them. In 1953, Nassiri had obeyed the Shah's foolhardy and powerless order to arrest well-entrenched Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq. In 1978, while Nassiri was serving as Ambassador in Islamabad, the Shah bent to pressure to recall and investigate Nassiri for his years as Savak chief. When the Shah issued a formal order that Nassiri return to Tehran, he sent a second and personal message through a Savak telephone call to Nassiri that he should disregard the Shah's formal summons and slip off to South Africa. Nassiri ignored the Shah's personal message and returned to Iran, because the Shah would not rescind the formal order. Former Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda and others were sacrificed in similar fashion by the Shah. Each example undermined loyalty to the crumbling monarchy, but the Shah lacked the courage to resist.

During the fall of 1978, the Shah made similar missteps which had the effect of undermining his own rule while reintroducing the sense that the unarmed opposition was irresistible. A good example was the Shah's decision on 5 November to allow mobs to run riot throughout Tehran. Military and police forces were withdrawn into the background by the Shah in order to allow the mob to have its day. Instead of facing up to the forces he had unleashed, the Shah chose to withdraw.

#### US Reactions

The cumulative effect of the Shah's collapse ultimately determined what US policy was to be in the late days of the Shah's reign. Bill concentrates on the inability of the Shah's "Rockefeller" supporters to face the reality of his condition. There was no such ambivalence among US officials on the scene. As early as mid-October 1978, they had correctly determined that a fatalistic and broken Shah would not survive.

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### Looking Ahead

The factors contributing to the Shah's ouster are important, because they relate to predictions over the fate of Iran's current government. Bill's volcano theory obscures the serious differences within the clergy over the question of its right to temporal rule, and, ultimately, whether the clergy wants to maintain responsibility after Khomeini is gone for the blood debts incurred by his government. It also obscures the centuries of monarchical rule in Iran and the past attractions of that system for Persians. In fairness, it should be noted that Bill correctly senses these underlying problems in his refusal to condemn the search during the Iran-contra affair for elements within the clergy who may be amenable to the earliest stages of a rapprochement with the US.

Bill exaggerates the political distance between Iran and the US. He chooses to scorn the ordinary Americans who manned the many public and private programs in Iran for their lack of academic understanding of Iranian culture. Bill's scorn leads him to discern a palpable anti-Americanism he describes as having been created by this lack of cultural awareness.

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I acknowledge that there are still those in Iran who want to poison relations through bloodshed to preserve their positions, and we should be most wary of playing into their hands. More important, however, we should not be too quick to accept conventional but flawed theories about the past, such as those contained in Bill's book. To do so would risk blinding ourselves to further opportunities to resume more normal relations with a country where many will continue to view the US as leader of an attractive Western alternative to harsh Islamic rule, not to mention US potential as an antidote to Soviet imperialism.

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